

Community shares cash, groceries with each other through Grand Rapids Area Mutual Aid Network

The Grand Rapids Mutual Aid Fund came together quickly in response to the looming needs around the COVID-19 pandemic but has had a big impact and is in the midst of working to build an even stronger community.

GRAMAN is a grassroots collective formed to make sure people's needs are taken care of during this difficult time. "It's an old idea that neighbors can take care of each other. That everyone has a need and everyone has something to offer. It's not charity. It's solidarity," says Amy Carpenter, one of GRAMAN's organizers. "If you have the trust of the community, it's not that hard to start a mutual aid fund."

The mutual aid fund specifically centers the needs of people of color, elders, the disabled, LGBTQ and underdocumented folks.

Carpenter notes this means decisions about where the money goes are all made by a giving circle of people of color. "The mutual aid fund takes in the money, the giving circle meets, and they have a list of folks who've asked for cash or food." This is done to specifically combat white supremacy and saviorism and put power into the hands of those most affected.

Carpenter also notes the fund tries not to be intrusive with questions, only asking how many people are in their household and how COVID has affected them. There's no required proof of income, address or any other documentation government agencies and nonprofit organizations usually ask for.

"It's direct cash giving-directly giving cash to the people who need it. It's not going through a 501c3. We strongly believe people know best what they need. So the mutual aid fund gives them access to that, which is money, rather than restricting it. We don't say 'We'll pay your rent to your landlord' or 'We'll pay directly to your utilities.' So if they need a fancy coffee drink for self care while getting groceries, that's fine, because it's all important," says Carpenter.

In addition to direct cash giving, the fund has also done grocery delivery. For the first 12 or 13 weeks of the crisis a dispatch team worked to pair shoppers and drivers with folks who could not get out to get their groceries. Volunteers would shop for the groceries, the fund would pay for them, and then they'd be delivered. At the beginning of the shut downs, they also kept disinfectant, toilet paper, bottled water-things which were hard to come by-on hand to make sure people had what they needed.

The group now works with food pantries to provide access to people who need groceries, having volunteers drive to the pantries and free food distributions to pick up the food and deliver it to those who've requested help. They specifically work with pantries who don't make

requirements about people living in their specific area so they get food to wherever people need it in the greater Grand Rapids area including Kentwood and Wyoming.

As the grocery money has diminished and pantries have stepped up to partner with GRAMAN, the group has shifted their focus to direct cash giving, as they realized they were the only ones in the area doing that type of work. "If our fundraising picks up again, we can do the grocery shopping again. Because we're not an institution, we can remain really fluid."

The response from the community has been extremely positive. "Hundreds have been grateful we're out here and doing what we're doing, people are so excited to give and receive. And we're learning as we go. We make a ton of mistakes and have to apologize and people are really understanding and help us make it work. Everyone's relationships have been strengthened by this. Volunteers are excited to share their connections with each other. And as neighbors, to see each other in a pandemic has been really something. That we're also combatting the isolation-I don't think we realized how deep the impact of that part would be."

GRAMAN says on the latest Facebook post about their work, "In the past 12 weeks, we have given cash, usually between the amounts of \$100 to \$500, to more than 224 folks who have been marginalized by current systems - all are people of color, and many undocumented, elders, disabled, and LGBTQ. Our total for cash distributions is currently \$80,000, We currently have outstanding requests for cash from almost 500 people. We've delivered groceries, including donated groceries and groceries we've paid for, to more than 310 marginalized people and families. For groceries that the fund has paid for, we've shopped for and delivered at least \$13,000 worth of groceries so far! Every little bit helps us build a community that cares for each other and values every neighbor."

Even with these numbers, the group has worked hard to make the mutual aid relational. "We do a lot of phone calls and emails back and forth. We only have a spreadsheet because so many people were asking," says Carpenter.

Donate to the mutual aid fund here: [Tinyurl.com/GGRMutualAid](https://tinyurl.com/GGRMutualAid)